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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, PRM/AFR AND IO/UNP

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [SMIG](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [MO](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: CONFIDENCE BUILDING MEASURES

Classified By: Consul general Millard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The UN-administered Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in Western Sahara have thus far fallen short in achieving their underlying political goal of pushing the parties to interact regularly and build a relationship for future negotiations. The CBMs, however, have provided a vital humanitarian service by keeping alive the link between families separated for more than 30 years through visits by air and telephone calls. Since 2008, the UN has urged an expansion of the CBM program by creating a road link between the camps in Algeria and the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara territory that would triple the number of family exchanges in a year. The UN is hopeful that the expansion will invigorate the parties to deal directly with one another while the Government of Morocco and the POLISARIO each see their own interests advanced by the program. On a recent visit to Western Sahara, Poloff witnessed first hand a family exchange in Dakhla facilitated by UNHCR and the GOM. END SUMMARY.

CBM: HOW IT WORKS

12. (SBU) The CBMs began in 2004 as a means to facilitate communication and contact between families in the camps in Algeria and the corresponding cities in the Moroccan-controlled Sahara through family visits and free telephone services to refugees in the camps. The program is managed by UNHCR with the logistical support of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which provides the planes to transport the families. UNHCR registered people who wanted to participate in the family visit in 2004 and again in 2008. Currently there are 41,166 people registered; 27,586 or 67 percent are in Tindouf and 13,580 are in the Territory. The beneficiaries are required to have a direct family link (parent, child, sibling, or spouse) with a person in the other location and priority is given to people with special needs, particularly the elderly. To date 9,060 (22 percent of those registered) have participated in a family visit.

13. (SBU) In addition to the family visits, UNHCR provides telephone centers in four of the five camps. The free telephone calls help the families maintain relations and allows those who have participated in a family visit to build on the experience and maintain close contact with family members. The beneficiaries are permitted one call per week which is limited to ten minutes. To date some 117,944 calls have been made.

¶4. (SBU) In the early hours on October 15, before the sun had risen, poloff observed a group of 28 Sahrawis dressed in their finest blue and white tribal robes as they waited in the Dakhla airport. There were elderly people and young children who were traveling to visit a parent or sibling they had never met or not seen for more than 30 years. The airport had more than a dozen officials from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) making final checks on the manifest and to provide security. Accompanied by a MINURSO civilian police and medical officer, the Sahrawis boarded a noisy Anotnov-26 plane for a two hour flight to the remote Tindouf camp in Algeria. In the early afternoon, the Sahrawi refugees from the camps arrived. They waited briefly in airport terminal while their bags were searched for any political pamphlets, POLISARIO flags or other contraband. UNHCR then whisked the refugees away delivering them to their families. Poloff was not allowed by the Government of Morocco (GOM) to observe the reunifications because, according to UNHCR field officers, on occasions the families display political banners or make a demonstration.

ESTABLISHING A LAND LINK

¶5. (C) The expansion of the CBM program to include a land link was first proposed during the Manhasset Talks in 2008. During his September 2009 visit to the region, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres secured a commitment from the parties pending various caveats (Reftel). UNHCR estimates that a land link would add 4,400 people to the 2,500 participants, nearly tripling the number of beneficiaries. The current proposal would create a land route from Tindouf, through the berm and to the town of Mahbes. Apart from the technical issues related to demining, the biggest political obstacle is that beneficiaries would pass through a five kilometer stretch of POLISARIO-controlled territory. The Moroccans, reluctant to give any tacit recognition to the POLISARIO, have raised objections, but also reassure us and the UNHCR that if Algeria shows the right political will, they will support the project.

¶6. (C) Alexander Ivanko, Political Advisor to MINURSO, told poloff that he believes ultimately the Moroccans will agree to some form of compromise which likely will involve MINURSO forces accompanying the beneficiaries through POLISARIO territory. "They view the visits as to their advantage," he explained. Clearly, one Moroccan goal would be to entice refugees to return to Moroccan-controlled Sahara. The Moroccans have poured millions of dirhams into creating a new Laayoune replete with modern infrastructure and, ostensibly, ample employment opportunities. Poloff toured the desalination plant and a state of the art port facility. The GOM was at pains to point out the three hospitals, a newly-constructed sports stadium, subsidized housing, and the absence of any shanty towns. The Moroccans believe that Sahrawi refugees visiting their relatives in Moroccan-controlled territory will be swayed by the favorable conditions they find and will decide their interests are best served by a future with Morocco.

¶7. (C) Despite Moroccan enticements, it is very rare for participants to stay in Morocco during a CBM family visit, Fatiha Abdalla, Head of Operations for CBM measures in Laayoune, told poloff. Since 2004, 35 people have stayed on Moroccan side and two remained in Tindouf according to Abdallah. She cautioned that personal and family issues are normally the deciding factors, rather than questions

of political loyalty. "There is no need to build confidence among the families. They are of the same blood, they have the same mentality, the same culture; they are not estranged," said Haile an UNHCR field officer facilitating the family visits.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE FOR WHOM?

18. (C) While UNHCR insists on the humanitarian and non-political nature of the family visits, Fatiha Abdalla admitted to poloff that, in theory the underlying assumption was that the implementation of the CBM would compel the parties to communicate more frequently to work out details of the visits. This interaction and communication would provide the basis for a relationship and hence build the confidence of the parties. In practice, Abdalla said, this has not happened. The parties have refused to deal with one another directly and have exclusively relied on UNHCR to act as the intermediary.

COMMENT

19. (C) Nevertheless, the CBM is a valuable program for both the humanitarian assistance it provides and for the potential promise of political dividends. An expansion of the program tripling the number of beneficiaries would undoubtedly create many opportunities for the parties to engage if they were willing. It is a positive sign that both the GOM and the POLISARIO see the program as beneficial though MINURSO's Ivanko opined that Algeria, which stands to gain little, might scuttle the deal. Finally, the strongest selling point for the CBM might well be that after years of disinformation from all sides as to the conditions on the ground, the people affected are able to see first hand the other side and hear the experience of their relatives.

This message was coordinated with Embassy Rabat.
MILLARD